

Hussein's
"Lessons to Learn"
From the
Desert War

by
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Introduction and translation
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As far as Saddam Hussein being a great military strategist, he is neither a strategist, nor is he schooled in the operational arts, nor is he a tactician, nor is he a general, nor is he a soldier. Other than that, he's a great military man.

Gen Schwarzkopf, 27 Feb 1991

Is this harsh criticism justified -- or did Saddam Hussein understand war and just execute poorly?

More than eight months after the war, Hussein, trying to answer that question, asked Carl von Clausewitz to provide a short "lessons to learn" briefing on the Desert War. Let's listen in ...

LESSONS TO LEARN -- OVERVIEW

Sir, you asked me to provide you both positive and negative "lessons to learn" on the recent military engagement against the Coalition forces. As you know, I don't believe anyone should start a war without being clear in his mind what he intends achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. Therefore, I'll evaluate the following key elements of the conflict: how clearly did you identify your political objectives -- in your own mind and in the mind of your opponents? And how effectively did you execute your strategy?

But, because it frames my assessment, *let me begin with my conclusion* -- my answer to your "Comprehension vs Execution" question. Having studied War for more than 20 years, I believe **you truly comprehend the essence of war** and the interplay of your objectives, your paradoxical Trinity, and your opponent's Trinity. Your effort fell short because of major **failures in execution**; you failed to break the Coalition's will prior to the outbreak of the war, and more importantly, when war seemed imminent, you failed to postpone the decision for battle (by withdrawing your forces into Iraq) until you had the advantage. I sincerely believe if you had executed properly, I'd be giving a "lessons to learn" briefing to George Bush today.

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

Issue #1: Identifying your political objectives.

You entered the crisis with a clear set of *limited* political objectives: raise the price of oil, control a greater share of Mideast oil

reserves, restore "lost" territory, and gain influence in the region. Your fifth (*limited*) objective, resolve the Palestinian problem, emerged as the crisis evolved.

I'll base the remainder of my assessment on the fact (per our discussion) that you recognized your *primary* objective was to gain influence over other Arab states in the region -- your primary means for achieving this goal was an effective military -- and oil profits were the means to finance your military instrument. With this framework in mind, your political object -- influence -- the original motive for going to war, established the *standard* for evaluating the impact on the forces you meant to move and the cost (loss of military capability) you should have been willing to pay. The other objectives were only means to that end -- not ends in themselves. Therefore, you should never have allowed the defense of Kuwait to adversely impact your ability to achieve your primary objective.

Lessons to Learn: Your political objectives met the most important test -- they provided you the necessary priorities and direction for your strategy. However, your failure to revalidate these objectives during the course of the war (especially after the air war demonstrated the Coalition's military effectiveness) proved to be a fateful flaw. Your policy must permeate all military operations and have a continuous influence on them -- especially when dealing with limited objectives.

Issue #2: Coalition understanding of your objectives.

Because of your political rhetoric and deception, the Coalition (with the exception of George Bush) did not fully grasp your primary objective. They debated among themselves, and offered a number of indirect countermeasures to force you out of Kuwait (embargoes, UN resolutions, etc) that actually increased your prestige in the Arab world. While President Bush clearly understood your goal was to gain influence, the Egyptian, Syrian, and French negotiators believed you would ultimately compromise and settle for control of the Kuwaiti oil fields. If the Coalition had gained a consensus to counter your true objective, they

would have likely continued the ground war past 100 hours to completely eliminate your "means."

Lessons to Learn: Your ability to focus the Coalition on the wrong political objectives inhibited their ability to counter your strategy. This offered you valuable maneuvering room until February 24th. However, the Coalition's lack of focus on your real political objectives proved to be a two-edged sword. While it offered you the advantages just discussed, debate in the U.S. Congress, and statements by the Egyptians and Syrians (that they would defend Saudi but not attack Kuwait) also made it difficult for you to realistically assess the probability of the Coalition countering your political objectives. While Bush was able to gain a UN resolution to restore Kuwaiti borders, it's unlikely he would have been able to gain a consensus to "limit" your influence in the region. Ultimately, Bush cleverly used the liberation of Kuwait as a justification to attack and destroy your "means" -- and deny you your real objective.

STRATEGY TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR OBJECTIVES:

Issue #3: Establishing your initial strategy.

Each of the objectives above initially had a positive purpose requiring a strategy with an offensive approach. Thus, your strategy to deceive the Saudis, Egyptians, and Western powers into believing your primary objective was to coerce an increase in the price of oil -- use tactical surprise to quickly defeat Kuwait -- and then assess world reaction to the attack -- was a textbook approach to achieving your objectives. If world reaction was weak, you would have had the option to then accomplish other secondary objectives (primarily control of the Saudi oil fields). Even though world reaction was strong, you had time to secure the 19th Province, and adjust that specific objective to a negative or defensive purpose. By publicly stating you "reclaimed the 19th Province", you made any military response to your invasion an attack on *YOUR* homeland. This increased Iraqi public and military willingness to endure hardship and resist Coalition "aggression."

Lessons to Learn: While recognizing that tactical deception/surprise is not a substitute for a long-term strategy, the take-over of Kuwait was an ideal operation to test world reaction to increased Iraqi influence in the Mideast. Because it was reasonable to assume world opinion would fear confrontation, you could consider your seizure of the lightly held province as a "short cut on the road to peace." Even when world opinion reacted strongly, defense of the 19th Province provided you the means to exhaust the Coalition's physical and moral capabilities.

In this near-perfect start, my only criticism is in your "timing" -- for my taste, you acted several years too early. From an international perspective, I believe you should have waited until the West was further along on their military drawdown -- their trend was downward. Domestically, you should have waited until you had completed your on-going nuclear, ballistic missile, and Supergun programs -- their trend was upward. The longer you waited to test Western will, the more favorable the military advantage.

Issue #4: Iraq's center of gravity and paradoxical Trinity.

In the Desert War, your will was Iraq's center of gravity -- and you used it to your advantage. You defined the political objectives; you established the military strategy; and you determined the connectivity between the government, the Iraqi people, and the non-Iraqi Arabs you were trying to influence. This centralization of power enhanced your clarity of purpose and effort. In a non-democratic nation like Iraq, I would expect nothing less.

Lessons to Learn: Even though your centralized control made it nearly impossible for the Coalition to use the public or military to impact your will, the quick defeat of Iraqi forces in Kuwait indicates the Coalition had found a weakness in your Trinity -- this is where we need to focus our attention. First, while centralized control facilitated the establishment of policy, it did not assure public support or military resolve. Therefore, even in Iraq, you needed to be more sensitive to the relationship between the government, the military, and

the population. For example, your use of terror to control the population and military, while effective in the short term, helped undermine the long-term resolve of your population and your forward deployed forces. Second, I believe you underplayed your influence with the non-Iraqi Arabs -- especially in reference to the issues of a Palestinian homeland and Western aggression against an Arab nation. If you had effectively carried these two issues to the Arab man-in-the-street, especially after the air war started, you would have presented the Coalition with an unsolvable dilemma. Arabs rioting in the streets of Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and perhaps France would have split the Coalition, diverted valuable military forces from the battlefield, and shattered the U.S. claim of a world united against Iraq.

Issue #5: The Coalition's center of gravity and paradoxical Trinity..

The public will, manifested most visibly in the UN resolutions, U.S. Congressional authorization to use force, and U.S. public opinion, was the Coalition's center of gravity. President Bush defined the political objectives, and then garnered world support and UN legitimacy to build the political, military, and public capabilities needed to achieve his goals. But rather than being unified in purpose like Iraq, the Coalition represented a fragile consensus based on the least common denominator. This offered you a number of lucrative opportunities to discredit Bush, divide the Coalition, and break the will of its people. These quickly became the central focus of your effort to defeat the enemy.

Lessons to Learn: Bush's goal was to force you out of Kuwait with coercion, if possible -- and force you out through successful battle if necessary. It was critical for you to break the Coalition's will before you were faced with that dilemma. Both sides exerted great effort to win public support. But because you didn't truly understand your enemy, you could not accurately identify where you should focus your primary effort -- and what impact your threats and coercive acts would have on his will.

You seemed to focus most of your effort on dissuading the U.S. public by recalling bloody military commitments in both Vietnam and Lebanon, using hostages as human shields, abusing POWs, threatening use of chemical weapons, and promising the "Mother of all battles." These tactics may have been effective in an extended conflict, especially if you had combined them with thousands of body bags coming home (to highlight the realities of war) and a preemptive "Air Tet" (to break the image of invincibility). But I believe your focus was misplaced because the U.S. public was not the key to *precluding* the Coalition from challenging you in Kuwait -- that key lay with either the UN Security Council or the U.S. Congress.

Your *primary* efforts should have been focused on splitting the Security Council vote to forcefully eject you from Kuwait. If you had compromised with either the Soviet Union or China, the UN resolutions would not have passed, and the Coalition (and U.S.) would have lost the "cover" of UN legitimacy -- making it nearly impossible for them to militarily force you out of Kuwait.

In the U.S., you should have also focused more effort on polarizing opposing positions in Congress. Delaying tactics, promises of compliance, or partial acquiescence with Bush's demands would have paralyzed an already divided Congress -- and prevented (or at least delayed) the passage of the resolution authorizing use of military force. However, when you blatantly refused to accept Bush's letter on January 9th, even the doves could not resist the call for war.

Throughout the crisis the enemy's diverse political goals and sensitivities offered you a number of significant opportunities to split the Coalition -- the most obvious being the Israeli "wild card." It was imperative, once you committed yourself to battle, that you use the fog and friction of the initial air strike to bring Israel into the conflict -- even if it meant launching all of your Scuds and all of your fighters at one time against the Jewish state. There was no other single act in your control that would strain, and likely break the Coalition's consensus.

Issue #6: Adjusting Your strategy.

The second major "execution" flaw was your failure to re-examine the strategic situation, re-evaluate your objectives, and then adjust your strategy to the new realities -- this is where your whole plan came apart. Your original strategy was to test the Coalition's will, and then at the decisive moment before battle -- assess whether it was more advantageous to continue the attack - or to delay the battle until you had the advantage.

As the Coalition tightened its embargo, built up its combat capability, and approached public deadlines you needed to reassess your game plan. One approach would have been to "give-in" at the last minute -- thereby retaining your full military capability to wait out the Coalition's patience -- and reassert your influence at a later date. A second option (my choice) would have been to withdraw your forces from Kuwait at the very last moment, but retain the disputed oil fields. This approach would likely have split the Coalition and minimized the loss of your military. The third option (your choice) was to stay put and pit your defense against his offense. You basically ended up betting your military -- and your country, on the inherent "advantage" of the defense.

Lessons to Learn: As you know, I believe all action is undertaken in the belief that if the ultimate test of arms should actually occur, the outcome will be favorable. While I believe "chance" is important in war, I also believe the laws of probability play a key role. From the enemy's character, institutions, state of affairs, and general situation we can, using the laws of probability, form an estimate of the opponent's likely course. If there was any doubt as to the Coalition's capability prior to the air campaign, there certainly no doubt after the campaign got into full swing. This was truly a case of being armed only with an ornamental rapier while being attacked with a sharp sword. Your primary mistake in this battle of wills with Bush, was to remain engaged with the Coalition even after the military outcome was all but decided. Even now I'm not sure why you decided to fight the

Coalition at its full strength in January -- when you declined to engage a non-combat-effective Coalition force in August.

SUMMARY

Issue #7: Where do you go from here?

I began this presentation with my conclusion that you *do* comprehend the essence of war. You established clear political objectives, and you identified and attacked your opponent's center of gravity. Your effort fell short because of major failures in execution: specifically in your failure to break the Coalition's will prior to the outbreak of the war, and more importantly, when war seemed imminent, your failure to postpone the decision for battle until you had the advantage. But with all of that behind us, the real issue is --where do you go from here?

If your *primary* objective is to *regain* influence over other Arab states in the region (why else would you ask me here?) -- your primary (near-term) means for achieving this goal should be political (your long-term means will again be military) -- and oil profits will be the means to finance your policy instruments. If my assumptions are true -- then I think today's assessment provides some insights from a global, regional, and domestic perspective.

From a global perspective, your primary near-term goal is to eliminate any rationale for the Western nations to meddle in your affairs. You want them to leave Iraq as quickly as possible, end the embargo, and return regional security matters back to the Arabs. Therefore, you must cooperate fully to resolve all the issues that initially brought them to -- and now keep them engaged in the region (your chemical and nuclear programs, defiant military actions, offensive military forces, terrorism, the Kurdish problem, etc). Concurrently you must pursue an aggressive, *positive* public relations campaign to convince the UN, and the Western governments and public they have no security concerns with the "new" Iraq. Over the years, as you exert more and more regional influence, you must be careful not to provide the West

another "event" they can use as an excuse to intervene in your regional affairs.

Regionally, your first challenge is to re-establish some credibility and influence with Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa. With your large oil reserves, economic power is a given. But I think political power -- especially related to the Palestinian issue -- will be your key to regaining immediate influence. You can build a strong case that the meetings on the Palestinian issue going on in Madrid are a direct result of your war -- and your sacrifice. This will strike a receptive chord -- because it's true. Over the longer term, you can use your political influence to shape OPEC decisions on oil prices and production quotas.

In Iraq itself, you need to better balance your Trinity by meeting some of the immediate needs of both the public and military. To accomplish this task, you might consider focusing your efforts on rebuilding the country, and perhaps even sharing power with a Provisional government that is democratically elected.

The whole process may take 10 or 15 years. But as I wrote so long ago:

... even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be considered as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.

This is especially true because you understand War.